VICTORY AT SEA: PROSE AND POETRY IN EXODUS 14-15

Richard D. Patterson

THE PRACTICE OF SETTING FORTH a historical event in both prose and poetic form occurs with some frequency in Hamito-Semitic literature. Watts notes that poetic "hymnic prologues and epilogues frequently bracket the central narrative."[1] He points out, however, that "the cuneiform texts use hymnic material as structural (primarily concluding) elements in both prose and poetic compositions, but do not mix the modes of presentation."[2] Likewise Lichtheim, commenting on the Kadesh battle inscription of Ramses II, observes that "the combination, in historical inscriptions, of prose narratives with poems extolling the royal victories is of course not new. What is new is that the poem should be more than a brief song of triumph that sums up the narration and should itself be narrative."[3] In fact in Egyptian literature poetry often occurs within historical prose narrative. Thus Ramses's inscription is formed with a prose introduction and conclusion as well as providing a prose narrative at one point to give the setting for Ramses's heroic extraction of himself from surrounding Hittite forces.[4] Having been deserted by his own soldiers in the critical hour of battle against the people of the area, Ramses asserted, "I attacked all the countries, I alone."[5]

Richard D. Patterson is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Semitics and Old Testament, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia.

[1] James W. Watts, "Song and the Ancient Reader," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 22 (1995): 135.

[2] Ibid., 138.

[3] Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 2:59. Lichtheim views the Kadesh Inscription as an example of epic poetry.

[4] For details see Alan H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 259-64.

[5] Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 2:62.

Following a prose heading, he told in poetic lines of his personal strength and valor in the face of combat.

> Head on he charges a multitude,
> His heart trusting his strength;
> Stout-hearted in the hour of combat,
> Like the flame when it consumes.
> Firm-hearted like a bull ready for battle,
> He heeds not all the lands combined;
> A thousand men cannot withstand him,
> A hundred thousand fail at his sight.[6]

Other notable examples include the victory steles of the nineteenth dynasty pharaoh Merneptah (1234-1222 B.C.)[7] and the twenty-fifth dynasty king Piye (751-716 B.C.).[8] Merneptah's inscription has a prose introduction that gives the king's titulary, followed by a formal encomium to the king, and a long epic poem telling of the king's mighty exploits and his return to Egypt in peace. The stele of King Piye includes a freer mixture of prose and poetry. The poetry is often set within the prose narrative to provide dramatic detail in direct speech. Interestingly Moses' Egyptian homeland provides the clearest examples o f the use of poetry within prose narrative.[9] Thus Watts remarks, "It is ancient Egyptian, more than Semitic, literature which provides a number of partial parallels and one very close parallel (the Piye Stela.) to the Hebrew usage."[10]

The Pentateuch displays a remarkable pattern of utilizing poetry to provide historical information and as a literary device to give structure to the narrative.[11] Sailhamer suggests that in the Pentateuch there is deliberate placement of poetry after narrative sections and before an epilogue.

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[6] Ibid., 2:63.

[7] Ibid., 2:73-78. Merneptah's stele is better known as the so-called "Israel Stele."

[8] Ibid., 3:66-89. Lichtheim agrees with a growing number of Egyptian scholars who say the name of the Cushite king commonly rendered as Piankhy should be rendered Piye (or Pi).

[9] Moses is both the assumed author and narrator throughout this study.

[10] Watts, "Song and the Ancient Reader," 138.

[11] The technique of inserting poetry in a prose narrative is attested elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., the well-known "Song of Deborah" in Judges 5). This observation in no way questions the inerrancy of the Old Testament canonical form (Michael A. Grisanti, "Inspiration, Inerrancy, and the OT Canon: The Place of Textual Updating in an Inerrant View of Scripture," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 [2001]: 577-98).

First, this pattern is found in the large poetic text (Gen. 49:1-27) at the close of the patriarchal narratives, along with the epilogue of Genesis 50.

Second, the two major narrative units that follow that of Genesis--the Exodus narratives and the wilderness narratives-both conclude with a poetic section, Exodus 15 and Numbers 23-24.

Third, the pattern embraces the whole Pentateuchal narrative, which concludes with the poetic "Song of Moses" and "Blessing of Moses" (Deut. 32-33) and the epilogue of Deuteronomy 34.[12]

This study is concerned with the use of poetry that is set within the narrative of Israel's adventure at the Re(e)d Sea.[13] Following an examination of the prose narrative and the poetic portion of the Re(e)d Sea crossing, basic hermeneutical principles will be drawn and applied to an evaluation of the historicity of each literary genre as well as the event itself.

LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS

THE NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

The narrative of the Re(e)d Sea crossing forms a pivotal part of a larger narrative detailing the Hebrews' journey from Egypt to Sinai (Exod. 12:37-19:2). The major stages of the itinerary are marked structurally by the recurring phrase "and they departed from." The narrative traces the Israelites' movement from Egypt to Succoth (12:37-13:19), from Succoth to the sea (13:20-15:21), from the sea to the oasis at Elim (15:22-27), from Elim to the Desert of Sin (16:1-36), from Sin to Rephidim (17:1-18:27), and from Rephidim to Sinai (19:1-2).[14]

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[12] John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 35-36.

[13] The debate as to whether the precise body of water involved should be called the Red or Reed Sea (יָם סוּף, which reflects the Egyptian word *twfy*, "papyrus reed") is not at issue here. For details see William F. Albright, *The Vocalization of the Egyptian Syllabic Orthography* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1966), 65; Thomas 0. Lambdin, "Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 73 (1953): 153; Herbert Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 140-41; Richard D. Patterson, in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament,* ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:620; James K. Hoffmeier, in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis,* ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:943; Bernard F. Batto, "The Reed Sea: Requiescat in Pace," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983): 27-35; and James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (New York: Oxford, 1996), 199-222.

[14] The identification of the various sites listed in the Exodus itinerary and their

The narrative account of the crossing of the sea forms the dramatic telling of events after leaving Succoth (13:20-22). The story falls into three observable units each introduced by the phrase "Then the Lord said to Moses" (14:1, 15, 26). The first main section contains three subsections. The opening subsection (A) begins with the Lord's instruction to Moses and company by the sea and a divine assurance that God would use the occasion to gain glory over Pharaoh (14:1-4). A short narrative (B) follows, relating how the pursuing Egyptians, who had a change of heart with regard to letting the Hebrews go (vv. 5-9), overtook them at the sea, (C) causing great consternation in the Israelite camp (vv. 10-14)- Subsections A and B are framed by the mention of Pi Hahiroth (vv. 2, 9) and are stitched together with the revelation that Yahweh would harden Pharaoh's heart so that the Egyptians would pursue the Israelites (vv. 4, 8). Subsection C features a dialogue between the people and Moses (vv. 10-14) that reveals the people's frame of mind.

The second main section again begins with the Lord's instructions to Moses, this time with regard to enabling the Israelites to pass through the sea. Once again God assured Moses that He would gain glory over Pharaoh, for the pursuing Egyptians would follow the Israelites into the sea, where the pursuers would perish (vv. 15-18). The account continues in a narrative that carries the story forward toward its climax.

Having sent His angel to take up a position between the two groups of peoples resulting in pitch darkness over the Egyptian camp while light remained for the Israelites (vv. 19-20), the Lord sent such a strong wind that the waters of the sea were divided and the ground made perfectly dry. Therefore the Israelites "went through the midst of the sea on the dry land, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left" (v. 22). The Egyptians pursued the Israelites into the water, only to find that divine intervention caused their chariot wheels to come off. This time the Egyptians were struck with panic (vv. 23-25).

The third main section brings the account to its dramatic denouement. Yet a third time Yahweh gave instructions to Moses. As he had been commanded previously (v. 16), Moses was now to stretch out his hand over the sea and the waters would come back to inundate the pursuing Egyptians (v. 26). When Moses had done

significance for the dating and historicity of the Exodus account have occasioned an extensive amount of discussion. For helpful recent discussions see Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 164-98; and John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 121-41.

as the Lord commanded, all the Egyptians perished in the waters (vv. 27-28). Because God had delivered His people from the Egyptians and brought them through the sea on dry ground, the peoples' earlier fear (v. 10) turned into reverential trust in the Lord and full confidence in Moses (vv. 30-31).

This account in chapter 14 has all the elements of good prose narrative. It has an observable plot that is carefully crafted with distinct sections and subsections. It presents strong characterization. Although much of the focus centers on Moses in contrast to his fearful followers, Yahweh is the main character. As is typical in biblical narrative, so here one of the distinctive features is "the overwhelming presence of God."[15] The pursuing Egyptians were clearly the chief foil, serving as antagonists to the Lord. That the story is all about Israel's redeeming Lord is particularly emphasized in the narrator's threading of sections of dialogue throughout the narrative. As Alter points out, "The biblical writers ... are often less concerned with actions in themselves than with how individual character responds to actions or produces them; and direct speech is made the chief instrument for revealing the varied and at times nuanced relations of the personages to the actions in which they are implicated."[16]

The subsections featuring direct communication between Yahweh and Moses (14:1-4, 15-18, 26) take on particular importance and underscore the fact of God's sovereign direction and guidance. The dialogue portions also call attention to the Egyptians' haughtiness and self-confidence (vv. 3, 5), the people's fear (vv. 11-12), and Moses' unwavering trust in the Lord (vv. 13-14). Further, great themes and phrases stitch the fabric of the account into its whole cloth. The Lord's sovereignty, as seen in His instructions to Moses, His hardening of the hearts of the Egyptians, and His assurances that He will gain glory over the Egyptians so that both the Israelites and Egyptians will know His power, is felt throughout the narrative. The theme of the waters of the sea pervades the whole, giving unity to the passage (vv. 2, 15-16, 21-23, 26-28). The effect is to emphasize the miraculous. The sovereign God, Israel's Redeemer, delivered His people by causing the waters of the sea to part in the middle, enabling them to pass on dry ground, while destroying the superior force of the Egyptians in those same waters.

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[15] Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 174.

[16] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 66.

THE POETIC ACCOUNT

The poetic account of chapter 15 includes the Song of Moses and the Israelites (vv. 1-18)[17] and the song of Miriam and the women (v. 21), which is introduced by a short narrative (vv. 19-20). The longer account has received a great deal of study with varying results as to genre type (hymn, hymn and thanksgiving psalm, enthronement psalm, liturgy, and victory song), number of stanzas (whether two, three, or four),[18] its date, and the issue of whether it is dependent on the prose account or vice versa. The tenor of the composition argues strongly for viewing this poem as a victory psalm[19] composed of three stanzas, each marked by the strategic placement of staircase parallelism (vv. 6, 11, 16b)[20] that forms a refrain and a hinge device. The opening spontaneous praise (v. 1)

[17] Interestingly in the Septuagint the Song of Moses occurs in the Pentateuch and also as the first of the odes appended to the Psalter. In the latter case verse 19 is included with verses 1-18 and is written in poetic form.

[18] See, for example, J. J. Burden, "A Stylistic Analysis of Exodus 15:1-21: Theory and Practice," *Ou Testamentiese werkgemeenskap in Suid-Afrika* 29 (1986): 34-72; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 172-82; Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 240-53; George W. Coats, "The Traditio-Historical Character of the Reed Sea Motif," *Vetus Testamentum* 17 (1967): 253-65; idem, "The Song of the Sea," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 31 (1969): 1-17; F. M. Cross, Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1950), 83-127; idem, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 112-44; David Noel Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1980), 179-227; Maribeth Howell, "Exodus 1.5, lb-18: A Poetic Analysis," *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 65 (1989): 5-42; James Muilenburg, "A Liturgy on the Triumphs of Yahweh," in *Studia Biblica et Semitica*, ed. Th. C. Vriezen (Wageningen: H. Veenman, 1966), 233-51; Richard D. Patterson, "The Song of Redemption," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 453-61; Hans Strauss, "Das Meerlied des Mose-ein 'Siegeslied' Israels?" Zeitschrift ftir die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 97 (1985): 103-9; James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 41-62; and J. P. van der Westhuizen, "Literary Device in Exodus 15:1-18 and Deut 32:1-43 as a Criterion for Determining Their Literary Standards," *Ou Testamentiese werkgemeenskap in Suid-Afrika* 17/18 (1984): 57-73.

[19] For the genre victory song see James H. Breasted, ed., *Ancient Records of Egypt* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 13:94; Peter C. Craigie, "The Song of Deborah and the Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 253-65; William F. Edgerton and John A. Wilson, *Historical Records of Ramses III* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 111-12; Alan J. Hauser, "Two Songs of Victory: A Comparison of Exodus 15 and Judges 5," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry,* ed. Elaine R. Follis (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 265-84; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature,* 2:35-39, 43-48; and Richard D. Patterson, "The Song of Deborah," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 142.

[20] So also Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 153-54.

and the singing of Miriam and the women (v. 21) simultaneously provide the theme for Moses' full victory hymn and a suitable framing device that forms a prelude and postlude for the whole passage (vv. 1-21).[21]

The case for viewing Exodus 15:1-18 as a victory song is substantially strengthened by the fact that it includes a number of features present in other Old Testament victory songs. Hauser isolates five such features common to Exodus 15:1-18 and Judges 5: (a) a focusing on the specific name of Israel's God, (b) the application of specific terms or phrases to God and or a description of God's role in the victory, (c) a description of God's use of the forces of nature to give Israel the victory, (d) the mocking of the enemy, and (e) a description of the enemy's fall.[22]

The first stanza of the poem includes the opening dedicatory praise (v. 1b), an exordium exalting Israel's God as Redeemer and Divine Warrior (v. 3),[23] a celebration of God's victory over Pharaoh's forces in the waters of the sea (vv. 4-5), and a refrain celebrating God's mighty strength (v. 6).

In the second stanza Moses again praised God for His great victory, using a series of similes to describe Egypt's great defeat. The enemy was consumed like chaff (v. 7) and "sank like lead in the mighty waters" (v. 10), which for Israel had "stood up like a heap" (v. 8). A touch of sarcasm is also added (Hauser's fourth point) in deriding the enemy's boastful intention to overtake and despoil God's people (v. 9).

The hinge refrain of verse 11, praising Yahweh's incomparability as a holy God and worker of miracles, sets the scene for the third stanza.[24] Here Israel's God is praised for the recent victory and for His love for His people, which gives them confidence in His future guidance in leading Israel through the wilderness into the

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[21] The opening words of verse 1 are reminiscent of a similar incipit in Psalm 89:1. A similar sentiment may also be seen in Psalm 45:1 (Richard D. Patterson, "A Multiplex Approach to Psalm 45," *Grace Theological Journal* 6 [1985]: 35-36).

[22] Hauser, "Two Songs of Victory" 280.

[23] See Childs, The Book of Exodus 252; for the motif of the Divine Warrior see F. M. Cross Jr., "The Divine Warrior in Israel's Early Cult," in *Biblical Motifs*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 11-30; Tremper Longman III, "Psalm 98: A Divine Warrior Victory Song," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (1984): 267-74; idem, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 135-38; and idem and D. G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

[24] Burden calls Yahweh's incomparability "the central motif of the song" ("Stylistic Analysis," 67).

land of their inheritance and the Lord's dwelling (vv. 12-17). A testimony to God's eternal reign closes the poem (v. 18).

This is a piece of carefully crafted literature. The individual units of the poem are well constructed with identifiable stanzas and strophes, while observable themes, phrases, and vocabulary blend the parts together. Thus the emphasis on the waters of the sea is featured in the first two stanzas (vv. 1, 4-5, 8, 10), and the motif of the right hand or arm of God occurs in the second and third stanzas (vv. 6, 12, 16a), together with the triumphant exclamation that Pharaoh's horses and chariots have been hurled into the sea (vv. 1, 4; cf. v. 21).[25]

A COMPARISON OF THE PROSE AND POETICAL ACCOUNTS

The prose and the longer of the two poetic accounts share an essential unity in several matters of theme and vocabulary. Both emphasize the sea and its waters (Exod. 14:2, 9, 16, 21-23, 26-28, 29; 15:4-5, 8, 10) in which the Egyptians perished (14:23, 26-28; 15:1, 4-5, 10).[26] Both mention that the waters were piled up on either side of the path by the breath or wind of God (14:21-22; 15:8). The theme of pursuit also appears in both accounts (14:4, 8, 17, 23; 15:9). Also the two accounts agree on several features: the waters congealed and stood fast like a wall so that the Egyptians unhesitatingly pursued the Israelites into the path that had been established, only to realize too late that Yahweh was returning the waters on them so that they perished in the midst of the sea (14:21-29; 15:8-10).

Nevertheless there are marked differences between the two. The prose narrative provides a setting for the core miracle, for it gives details of the arrival of both the Israelites and the Egyptians at the sea. Further, the prose narrative includes such matters as the Israelites' fear because of the Egyptian presence, the divine assurances to Moses and the angelic intervention, the role played by Moses and his outstretched hand, the Egyptians' fright at the prospect of impending doom, and the Israelites' renewed reverence

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[25] See also Mark S. Smith, "The Poetics of Exodus 15 and Its Position in the Book," in *Imagery and Imagination in Biblical Literature*, ed. Lawrence Boadt and Mark S. Smith (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 2001), 26-29. Smith, however, opts for a bipartite division of the poem (vv. 1-12, 13-18) reflecting the priestly redaction of the book. Thus "vv. 1-12 refer generally to the events leading up to and including the victory at the Sea rendered in the first half of the book, while vv. 13-18 anticipate the events following the victory at the sea, as described in the second half of the book" (ibid., 34).

[26] This is also found in 15:19 and 21.

of the Lord and trust in Moses. A feature unique to the prose account is its emphasis on the fact that the Israelites went through the parted waters on dry ground (14:16, 21-23, 29).[27]

Also the poetic account has several unique elements, such as the opening dedicatory praise and exordium (15:lb-2), the application of the motifs of the Divine Warrior (v. 3) and the right hand of the Lord (v. 6), and the themes of the burning anger (v. 8) of the faithful, holy, wonder-working God (vv. 11, 13) that caused horse and rider (v. 1) and chariot and army (v. 4) to perish in the waters. "In Exod. 15:10, 4-5, the poet insists that the Egyptians sank in the sea, into which Yhwh 'cast' them.... In Exodus 14 ... Yhwh casts the sea .... on the Egyptians."[28] Of particular significance also is the prophetic portrayal of God's leading of His people through the midst of terrified nations into the land where Yahweh Himself would dwell and reign forever (15:13-18).[29]

Moreover, the longer poetic account is filled with graphic imagery and the free use of figurative and hyperbolic language rather than the straightforward narrative details of the prose account. In addition to the similes noted above, Yahweh would make the nations of Canaan "motionless as stone" (v. 16). Other figures include metaphor (v. 15), hendiadys (vv. 2, 4, 14, 16), synecdoche (vv. 1, 6, 8, 10, 16), irony (v. 9), and rhetorical question (v. 11). Some examples of paronomasia occur (e.g., כָּסָה "cover"/"sank," vv. 5, 10; and רוּחַ, "breath"/"wind," vv. 8, 10).

HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Several conclusions may be derived from this examination of these texts. First, whatever the date of the respective prose and poetic accounts, one must deal with the final form of the full story of the miraculous crossing of the Re(e)d Sea, including the use of poetry set within the flow of the narrative. Both the longer poem of Moses' song and the shorter poetic piece of Miriam's song must be taken into account. Scholars have noted that women in the Old Testament played a prominent part on such occasions as the incident at the Re(e)d Sea, for they assumed a leading role in the music and

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[27] This feature does occur, however, in the continuing narrative in verses 19-21.

[28] Baruch Halpern, *The Emergence of Israel in Canaan* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983), 37.

[29] In this regard Michael A. Fishbane points out that this feature links the Exodus to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 15:13-16) and the conquest of Canaan (*Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* [New York: Schocken, 1979], 122-25).

dancing (e.g., Judg. 5:1-31; 11:34; 1 Sam. 18:6-7; 2 Sam. 6:5, 14-16, 20-22). Therefore some have suggested that the shorter song of Miriam is older than the longer song of Moses.[30] Others attempt to relate her song to the longer poem by suggesting that Miriam's song provided "the antiphonal response and rhythmic accompaniment" to Moses' song.[31] Thus Kaiser remarks, "Miriam led the women perhaps in an antiphonal response, repeating the song at the conclusion of each part or strophe, accompanied by timbrels and dancing."[32]

Perhaps the simplest solution is to view Miriam's song as being sung immediately after the Israelites' safe passage through the sea and the defeat of the Egyptians, while Moses soon afterward composed the poetic masterpiece of Exodus 15:1-18 and led the people in its singing.[33] Understood in this way, verses 19-21 complete the narrative on the miraculous crossing of the Re(e)d Sea (i.e., 13:17-14:31; 15:19-21), which is then followed by the narrative of the journey into the wilderness that eventually brought Israel to Mount Sinai (15:22-19:2). The initial particle כִּי of 15:19 may then be understood as introducing a pluperfect temporal clause that stiches verse 19 to the events narrated in 14:30-31. This is followed by additional information that relates the further activities of Miriam and the women (15:20-21).

Understood in this way, the narrative beginning in 14:30-31 is continued in 15:19-21, with the whole unit of 14:30-31 and 15:19-21 forming the second half of the full unit begun at 14:26.

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[30] See, for example, Martin Noth, *Exodus*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 123; and Coats, "The Song of the Sea," 3-4. J. G. Janzen proposes that the poem of verses 1-18 is really Miriam's song, to which Moses and the a people responded antiphonally ("Song of Moses, Song of Miriam: Who Is Seconding Whom?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54 [1992]: 211-20). See also, but with differing emphasis, S. E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 145.

[31] Watts, "Song and the Ancient Reader," 142. See also Cassuto, *Exodus*, 182; and William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 548.

[32] Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "Exodus," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 396.

[33] Bernhard W. Anderson concludes that "the Song of Miriam ... is an independent song which was an immediate poetic response to the event of Yahweh's liberation that it celebrates" ("The Song of Miriam Poetically and Theologically Considered," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, 290-91). Anderson's views on the importance of Miriam's song are largely shared by Walter Brueggemann ("A Response sponse to 'The Song of Miriam,' by Bernhard Anderson," in *Directions in Biblical Poetry,* 297-302).

The seeming redundancy of 15:19, troublesome to many,[34] serves as a stitching device that threads the two subsections (14:26-29, 30-31; 15:19-21) together.[35] Exodus 15:1-18 would then be seen as an independent poem (whatever its time of composition) inserted into the final narrative.

Second, the literary constraints attendant to the genres of prose and poetry inevitably require that each be evaluated on its own terms. The victory song of 15:1-18 should not be pressed with a literalistic hermeneutic and the prose narrative should not be expected to contain all the sensational features of the poem.[36]

Third, the combination of the prose and poetic accounts sketches a far richer portrait of what took place at the Re(e)d Sea. Houston astutely concludes that "the use of different kinds of material enables the same event to be seen in two different and equally essential ways."[37]

Fourth, theologically the union of the two accounts underscores the sovereign and awesome power of Israel's miracle-working God and its effect in the lives of God's people. The events at the sea constitute "an instantaneous and astounding victory, utterly confounding all human expectation, worked by the mighty arm of the Lord who with his own breath heaps up the wave and with his own breath looses it upon the enemy."[38]

Fifth, a further word needs to be said about the function of the poetry that is set into the prose narrative. Taking its theme from the song of Miriam (15:21), Moses' song is designed to underscore

[34] See, for example, Janzen, "Song of Moses," 213-15; and Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," *Bible Review* 5 (1989): 18-20. The much-debated "to them" (masculine plural) in 15:21 is easily explained as the women's response to the implied exclamations of renewed trust in Yahweh and Moses made by the Israelite people (masculine nouns, 14:30-31).

[35] For the varied uses of repetition as a literary device see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 88-113; and Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible,* 2d ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), 51-95. Licht views 15:19 as a poetic tricolon, which, though not part of the psalm (15:1-18), serves as "a marking device of the prose account that quotes the Song" (ibid., 92).

[36] For the distinction between "literalistic" and "literal" exegesis see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 310-12.

[37] Walter J. Houston, "Misunderstanding or Midrash? The Prose Appropriation of Poetic Material in the Hebrew Bible," *Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 109 (1997): 342-55.

[38] Ibid., 354. "The effect of these psalms on their narrative contexts is to point out to readers God's underlying knowledge and control of events, thus turning the stories into examples of how God cares for God's people" (Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 190).

the Lord's role in the great victory over the Egyptians.[39] Thus it reinforces the prose narrative's central theme, which revolves around the Lord's instructions to Moses and His intentions to deliver the people whom He had redeemed out of Egypt (14:1-4, 15-18, 26).

This feature of praising God for the defeat of the enemy is typical of ancient victory songs.[40] As in the case of the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5), God's people were in desperate circumstances.[41] In Deborah's case a generation of Canaanite oppression had left Israel so weakened that its very existence was at stake. In Israel's experience at the sea, there was the real possibility of extinction at the hands of the mighty Egyptian military force. In both cases only God could overcome the enemy, and He did. Therefore He was to be thanked, praised, and trusted.

Sixth, the high exaltation of God in Moses' song draws attention to the sharp contrast between the Israelites' attitude after the crossing of the sea and their changed outlook in the adventures that took place before their arrival at Mount Sinai. The thankful people returned to being a group of perpetual complainers (15:24; 16:1-3; 17:1-2).[42] This had already been seen in the narrative account of the adventure at the sea (14:11-12). "The great disparity between God and people is emphasized not only by exalting God but also by exposing the unworthiness of the Israelites. The latter are depicted as chronic complainers."[43] The poetry of 15:1-18 thus serves as a transitional piece. Moses' rehearsal of God's great triumph over the Egyptians (vv. 1-12) and his singing of God's intentions to provide full guidance for the journey to the Promised Land (vv. 13-18) call attention to (a) the renewal of the prose account

[39] See also David M. Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1993), 27; and Kaiser, "Exodus," 392.

[40] For the genre of victory song see Craigie, "The Song of Deborah and the Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta," 253-65; Edgerton and Wilson, *Historical Records of Ramses III*, 111-12; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature,* 2:35-39; and Patterson, "The Song of Deborah," 142.

[41] A number of similarities exist between Moses' song and Deborah's song. Both begin with an opening exordium to God (Exod. 15:1-2; Judg. 5:2-3); both emphasize the intervention and power of Israel's God (Exod. 15:1, 3-8, 10-12; Judg. 5:4-5); both tell of the arrogance and evil intentions of the enemy (Exod. 15:9; Judg. 5:19); and both divinely engineered victories took place in connection with water that inundated the enemy (Exod. 15:1, 4, 8, 10; Judg. 5:20-21), turning the enemy's superior chariot force into a liability (Exod. 15:2; Judg. 5:22; cf. Exod. 14:24-25).

[42] As in the case of Moses' song, so Deborah's great song of praise is followed by an account of the people's backsliding (Judg. 6:1-6).

[43] Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 134.

featuring Miriam s song of praise (vv. 19-21) and (b) the grumbling
of a people who should have been aware of God's continued under-
taking for them.

The question remains as to the relative historicity of the re-
spective accounts and the historical conclusions that can be drawn
from them. First, the similar features of the two accounts of the
crossing of the sea reveal an essential core of facts. (a) The fleeing
Israelites were bottled up between the sea and their Egyptian pur-
suers. (b) Miraculously the sea parted in such a fashion as to allow
the Israelites time to cross safely through the waters to the other
side. (c) When the Egyptians attempted to follow the Israelites on
the same path through the sea, the waters returned, drowning
them. (d) Following the safe passage and the demise of the Egyp-
tians, the Israelites celebrated and gave praise to Yahweh.

Second, the fact that one account of the crossing is written in
prose narrative and the other in poetry does not militate against
the historicity of these essential facts.[44] (a) The prose account is
part of a larger account written in quasi-journalistic style narrat-
ing Israel's travels after the exodus from Egypt. (b) The poetic ac-
count enlarges on Miriam's song and then includes Moses' own vic-
tory song, in which the Israelites joined him in praising the Lord.
(c) Thus the combined effect yields a fuller picture of events sur-
rounding the adventure at the sea.[45]

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[44] Abraham Malamat remarks, "We could all do well to give heed to Wellhausen's
dictum, astounding for him: 'If it [the Israelite tradition] is at all feasible, it would
be utter folly (Torheit) to give preference to any other feasibility' " ("The Proto-
History of Israel: A Study in Method," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, ed.
Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 19831, 310).

[45] The conclusions reached here are in harmony with a growing body of evidence
supporting the historicity of the Exodus event, from the departure from Egypt to the
Conquest. Thus Hoffmeier concludes his comprehensive study by observing, "The
body of evidence reviewed in this book provides indirect evidence which shows that
the main points of the Israel in Egypt and exodus narratives are indeed plausible"
(*Israel in Egypt*, 226). See also Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents,* 109-18. It
should be noted that the precise order of creation of the respective literary accounts
concerning the crossing of the sea is uncertain. It may be a case of a historiographic
prose tradition drawn from a previous poem, as Yair Zakovitch suggests for the
relation between Judges 4 and 5 ("Poetry Creates Historiography," in *A Wise and
Discerning Mind*, ed. Samuel M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley [Providence, RI: Brown
Judaic Studies, 20001, 313). If so, a literary scenario might be something like the
following. (1) Moses may have kept journalistic notes of events that transpired along
the way. (2) Such data included a record of Miriam's song after the crossing of the
sea. (3) Moses composed his song based on the theme of Miriam's song. (4) In the
final account Moses' song is inserted between the prose narrative concerning the
crossing of the sea and the record of the celebration led by Miriam and the women.